

# What Never to Do for Your Melancholic Dog

Is your dog looking sad or even depressed? Don't make this mistake. It could backfire in a major way, and you certainly don't want that. Here are 5 ways to help him or her without sabotaging your own well-intentioned efforts.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- No one really knows if dogs suffer from clinical depression similar to humans, but we certainly know they experience mood and behavior changes
- If your dog seems depressed, your first stop should be your veterinarian's office to rule out a medical condition with symptoms that mimic the symptoms of depression
- There are things you can do to help your sad dog feel better, including sticking to a consistent daily routine, and offering distractions rather than reinforcement for his depressed mood
- If your dog isn't getting enough time or attention from her human family, it can increase her risk for depression

**Editor's Note: This article is a reprint. It was originally published March 29, 2017.**

No one knows for sure whether dogs suffer from depression like people do. They certainly experience mood and behavior changes, but those changes are usually temporary and traceable to a recent event in the dog's life.

Maybe it's September and the kids are back in school. Or perhaps you've added a puppy to the family and your older dog is feeling left out.

Dogs who suffer the loss of a family member (human or pet) often go through a grieving period. And of course many dogs relinquished to shelters seem to experience a period of sadness and uncertainty.

The problem with diagnosing clinical depression (which is different from short-lived episodes of depressed behavior) is that even in humans, there's no biological test to identify the condition. Medical doctors take note of symptoms and what the patient tells them about their feelings to arrive at a diagnosis.

Since dogs can't talk to us, we must rely on our powers of observation to determine if a canine companion is feeling down in the dumps. Generally speaking, when a vet or veterinary behaviorist describes a patient as depressed, the dog is displaying a change in normal behavior.

# Your Dog's Behavior May Be a Warning Sign to a Medical Problem

If your dog's behavior changes, even if you suspect you know why, it's always a good idea to check in with your veterinarian.

Many changes in behavior symptomatic of depression, including lack of appetite, potty accidents in the house, sleeping more than usual, reluctance to exercise and sudden aggressive behavior in a dog who has never shown aggression, can also be signs of any number of underlying medical conditions.

If your dog gets a clean bill of health from your veterinarian, there are things you can do to help your depressed pooch cheer up.

## 5 Tips for Helping a Depressed Dog

1. **Keep daily routines as consistent as possible** — Pets do best when they know what to expect from one day to the next. Try to keep mealtimes, exercise, walks, playtime, grooming, bedtime and other daily activities on a consistent schedule.
2. **Keep your dog's diet and mealtimes the same** and spice up what's on the menu.

It's important to continue to offer him the same food he's used to, at the same time each day, but if you find your dog isn't interested in eating much, consider offering a yummy knucklebone for dessert, or make a tasty treat for training time that he hasn't had before.

Store what he doesn't eat in the fridge, and offer it to him again at his next regularly scheduled mealtime. Use his hunger to help him get his appetite back by resisting the urge to entice him with unhealthy food toppers.

3. **Be careful not to inadvertently reward your dog's depression** — It's only natural to want to comfort your sad pet, but unfortunately, giving attention to a dog who is displaying an undesirable behavior can reinforce the behavior.

Obviously the last thing you want to do is reward a lack of appetite, inactivity or other types of depressed behavior in your dog. Instead, you want to help her over the hump.

A better idea is to try to distract her with healthy, fun activities that provide opportunities for positive behavior reinforcement. This can be a walk, short training sessions, a game of fetch, nose work or offering her a food puzzle toy or recreational bone.

4. **Give it time** — Your dog's depression may take a few days or even weeks to blow over, but eventually most pets return to their normal lively selves.

If at any point you feel your pet is suffering unnecessarily or there is something more going on than a case of the blues, I recommend discussing the situation with your vet or a veterinary behaviorist.

5. **Use natural remedies, if needed** — There are some excellent homeopathic and Bach flower remedies that can be easily administered to your depressed dog until you see an emotional shift for the better.

Some of my favorites include homeopathic Ignatia, Spirit Essences Grouch Remedy or Winter Blues for seasonal affective disorder, several Bach flower remedies including Mustard and Green Hope Farm Grief and Loss.

# Is Your Dog Depressed Because He's Being Ignored?

When our home or work lives (or both) get very busy and stressful, the family member who most often gets forgotten is the dog. If your canine companion is getting lost in the shuffle of your busy life, it could be the reason he's blue. Signs your canine companion needs more of your time and attention:

- **He's sleeping more than normal** — An otherwise healthy young or adult dog who sleeps the day away is bored and in need of physical exercise and playtime, as well as mental stimulation.

Try to set aside an hour a day to focus on your dog. Take walks, head to the dog park, go running together or play a lively game of fetch. Also consider enrolling your dog in an obedience class or a canine activity like agility or nose work to keep him mentally challenged.

- **She's getting into mischief around the house** — If your canine companion suddenly starts relieving herself indoors, it could be a sign she's stressed, but there might also be an underlying health problem, so I recommend a visit to your veterinarian to rule out a medical condition.

If she gets a clean bill of health, then it's probably safe to assume she's in need of more of your time and attention. If she's also starting to be destructive or disruptive around the house, it's almost a sure bet she needs more from you.

If part of the problem is that she's alone all day while you work, consider hiring a dog walker to take her out for a stroll mid-day. You might also see if there's a doggy daycare in your area where she could spend a few hours a week interacting with other dogs.

You'll also want to insure she's getting enough daily exercise and mental stimulation to keep her in balance. Remember, a tired dog is a good dog!

- **He's getting fat** — Dogs in the wild spend most of their waking hours hunting down their next meal. Dogs in our homes spend most of their awake-time eating what we feed them and looking for a good spot to nap.

The result is an epidemic of overweight and obese dogs, and we have no one to blame but ourselves. If you're overfeeding or over-treating your dog as a way to soothe your own guilt over not spending enough time with him, remember that food is a lousy substitute for your time and attention.

- **She's disobedient** — Dogs naturally want to please their humans, so if your pooch is giving you attitude, it's a good bet you need to spend more time with her. It could be she needs an obedience refresher course, or it's possible you haven't discovered what truly motivates her.

Some breeds are more eager to please than others, so if your dog has an independent nature, you'll need to learn how to get her attention.

- **He's still not house-trained** — While it's true some dogs are easier to house train than others, an adult dog who has frequent accidents indoors isn't getting the time and attention he needs to learn that all peeing and pooping is done outside. Following a very consistent "time for your walk" routine, crate training as necessary and positive behavior reinforcement are the keys to success in housetraining.

## Sources and References